

History from Headphones – “Hörpol”, an Audio Tour through the Streets of Berlin



Equipped with a map and a Walkman, young people can experience Jewish history on the spot in the centre of Berlin.

Morning office-hour traffic, a back courtyard like so many others in Berlin-Mitte, the central district of the city. Outside, in the Rosenthaler

Street, a bus clatters by, a lorry makes deliveries to the supermarket across the street. In the courtyard itself, it is very quiet; the October sun shines on the roofs.

Sixty years ago the place was filled by a brisk hustle and bustle; in house number 39, Otto Weidt had set up a workshop for the blind that produced brooms and brushes. A “strategically important factory” for the war effort whose workers were exclusively Jews. At one of the 27 *Hörpol* stations Dietrich Lehmann, an actor with the Berlin Grips Theatre, describes over the headphones how “Papa Weidt”, as he was called, protected his workers from the Nazis.

Hörpol is an Internet platform for young people. Free of charge, they can there download a city map and audio files. The two to ten minutes reports are about Jewish history during the Third Reich and the present, about despair and hope, courage and brutality.



“*Hörpol* develops its effect only on the spot”, says the web site conceived and realised by author Hans Ferenz in 2009. And the particular attraction of the mini plays, played over MP3 player or mobile phone, lies in direct visits to places that are steeped in history and are today integrated into the brisk urban bustle round the Rosa Luxemburg Square, the Hackescher Market, the Oranienburger Street and the Rosenthaler Square.



Celebrity support for Hörpol



In many plays contemporary witnesses get a chance to speak. For example, the Turkish Jew Isaak Behar reports how he escaped deportation to a concentration camp from the Jewish old people's home in the Große Hamburger Street, today a memorial site, because an elderly lady named Hannah gave him a pass

and so his freedom and his life. The story of Hannah and Issak is told on the "first radio show to go" by Murat alias Serkan Sahan, an actor of Turkish origin, who asks his listeners to "Think about it – if Adolph Hitler were still around there'd be no Bushido in Germany, no pretty waitress at the pizza parlour next door. Half the Hertha football team would be dead".

Entertainingly and in many places with humour, the plays convey Jewish history to young people. The makers of *Hörpol* have been able to gain the support of numerous celebrities for their project. For instance, in the play *Fromms*, Tatort detective Axel Prahl talks with moderator Murat about the Jewish inventor and manufacturer Julius Fromm, who ran a condom factory in no. 9 Mulack Street, where today there is a playground. At three Hörpol stations the writer Klaus Kordon reads from his novel *Julian's Brother*, which takes place during the Third Reich and tells the story of the Jew Jule and the non-Jew Paul.



Very important are the comments of young people at the end of almost every play. They discuss what has just been heard and ask: "What's that like today?". For example, young people attending the Jewish School in the Große Hamburger Street introduce the school to listeners. The building, which is currently being

refurbished with funds from the federal government's Stimulus Plan II, is also open to non-Jews. To the sound of hip-hop delivered in Klezmer style, the pupils tell of their feeling of community, the strict security arrangements and the class trips to Poland and Israel.

"There will always be people like me"

In the August Street, at the corner of Joachim Street, those taking the *Hörpol* tour are themselves suddenly accosted: "Hey, you there!" cries



the voice of someone who turns out to be the block warden. Those headphones, he says, look very suspicious to him and the Reich Propaganda Ministry.



It is hard to imagine that here, where there is now a playground, a jumping course for skaters and a lawn for sunbathing, during the Second World War the elderly lady living at number 9, and with her the Jew Josef Schwarz, whom she was hiding, were arrested by the Gestapo.



“There will always be people like me”, warns the block warden at the end of the play, “always.” The Hörpol tour repeatedly calls to mind the fact that Nazi ideas are still lurking below the surface of society even today. The young listeners should be made aware of the danger.

The listener moves far away from the other passers-by when he goes to the entrance gate of the Garrison Cemetery in the Kleine Rosenthaler Street. 1.045 victims of the devastating street fighting in Berlin in 1945 were buried here in a mass grave. “Look at it”, a voice urges the visitor; the tour of the cemetery is accompanied by a song that the Berlin band *The Munchies* wrote and recorded especially for this station.

History lessons of this calibre get to you. And therefore the web site emphasizes that “there are no mandatory routes” with *Hörpol*. The listener need not visit all 27 stations. He can decide where he starts, and he can break off the tour if it becomes too much for him.



History far away from the mustiness of dusty books



For school classes and their teachers who want to go deeper into individual themes, *Hoerpol.de* offers extensive teaching materials for downloading. The materials for classes nine to thirteen were developed together with the Regional Institute for Schools and Media for all kinds of schools, ranging from secondary general school to

grammar school. Far from the musty dust of many history books, *Hörpol* establishes a direct relation to the immediate everyday life of the listeners. And isn't it a sight more interesting when, instead of a grey-bearded history teacher, moderator Murat brings history to the generation that were spared the experience of the Third Reich and urgently warns them about the "crass Nazi cop" Adolph Hitler?

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